

What Just Happened? (Reason and the Majority of One)

INTRODUCTION

I titled this talk “What Just Happened” several months ago when we were planning the summer programming. I didn’t know exactly what I would be talking about today—I didn’t know what would have “just happened,” but I suspected *some things* would have happened—because that’s how the world works—stuff happens; things change.

All of life is, as they say, “existential,” and Sundays are no different. With Sundays, as with life, we can plan great things way off in the future. But . . . then life happens. And in congregations, what’s happening *right now* can mean everything, because congregations are about both individuals and about the larger world.

ONE

So, on a practical level, several things just happened:

In terms of the building, look around you . . . A magnificent new facility is coming into shape, thanks to the generosity of our people and the hard work of fundraisers and people who understand how construction works.

Our Capital Campaign, “Building Humanism from the Inside Out”—in the works since 2014—resulted in the massive overhaul of our building that you see. But, as with any large rehab, there were hidden snares. Asbestos abatement, for example, cost us more than \$200,000 and added weeks to the construction schedule.

Consequently, we need to raise more money to be secure in the fundraising we have already done. Also, we knew from the beginning that the amount of money we raised wasn’t going to do everything. The shiny new parts of our building throw into sharp contrast the grungy, frayed parts of our building.

We will be celebrating what we have gotten done with a Renovation Celebration two weeks from now, on Sunday, September 17th. At at First Hour at 9:30 on the 17th I will be answering questions you might have about what’s happening next.

But, our facility is only one aspect of First Unitarian Society.

Thanks to the generosity of our members and friends and the hard work of our Stewardship Committee, our operating budget—the day-to-day budget that keeps the electricity and the water on—is strong.

I should mention that too often when there is a large capital campaign, giving to the operating budget falls off, often to the point that staff layoffs become inevitable. Again, thanks to you, this has not happened. (Yet, at least.) Refer back to point A: each Sunday in a congregation is existential.

So—building and programming. It's happening.

TWO

As we open our refurbished doors, we need to be asking the most fundamental question people in an organization can ask of that organization, which is, Why the heck are we here? As I have mentioned several times over the years, I believe that every organization needs to continually ask itself this most basic of questions: Why are we here?

This is not an abstract question.

We make our values clear in our Aspirations. Here, we must always be asking, What is real? and What is important? What does it mean to live a moral life? How is that done?

Science fiction writer Octavia Butler said, "all that you touch you change / all that you change, changes you." First Unitarian Society has changed the fabric of the Twin Cities. But that fabric has also affected us. We need to check ourselves occasionally to ascertain if we have fallen into complacency.

Why the heck is First Unitarian Society in the world?

You see, something has always "just happened." There's always a forest full of trees and a swamp full of alligators.

This year we begin our 136th year at FUS. What are we doing here?

This morning I want to dig a bit deeper into one answer to that question. To do that, I'd like for you to consider another question: If you're a political liberal, what *is it*

about President Trump that you find offensive? Is it the *content* of his beliefs and policies or is it the *affect*—*how* he says it. Or both?

Think about it a bit before you jump to any conclusions.

Yes, I do think this question has something to do with why FUS is here and needs to be here. Which I'll get back to . . .

The September issue of the *The Atlantic* magazine includes an article by Kurt Anderson titled "How America Lost Its Mind."

In his article, Anderson tells of the American "promiscuous devotion to the untrue." "promiscuous devotion to the untrue."

Anderson surmises that "maybe a third" of Americans are "solidly reality-based." After all, Anderson points out, two-thirds of Americans believe in angels and demons. Half believe in a personal god who is active in the universe. And half believe in the existence of a place called heaven.

Anderson writes,

. . . being American means we can believe anything we want; that our beliefs are equal or superior to anyone else's, experts be damned.

As someone who has lived through the cultural shift that has brought us to this existential moment—as someone who became a Unitarian Universalist and a Humanist in the late-1970s—I think Anderson's critique is spot-on.

An important thing to remember and consider is that the post-truth, fake news idea came from the left, not the right. From Liberals. It was our *liberal* counter-cultural movements here in the US that insisted upon experience over rationality.

This idea has Unitarian roots. Henry David Thoreau and his Transcendentalist circle preached the gospel of experience over reason.

For example, in his essay "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau wrote, "any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one." This is a rousing call to liberals fighting for social justice. I remembering underlining it in red when I first read it as a kid. Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" was my bible as I faced being drafted into the army during the Vietnam War. In retrospect, I have to admit I was more interested in not getting shot than I was in any larger moral question!

The problem is that Thoreau's sentiment is often not so much understood as individual conscience as it is about *individualism*. And that's the great American disease.

After all, the great hero of the right, Native American killer, law-abiding Mexican killer, and innocent animal murderer Davey Crockett wrote, "be always sure you're right, then go ahead." Be sure YOU are right, then go ahead . . .

The Thoreau quote and the Crockett quote boil down to the same idea.

Thoreau was a nativist—an American exceptionalist—just as Davy Crockett was and Donald Trump is. We need to face that fact. American exceptionalism is built into the DNA of Unitarian Universalism just as its built into the DNA of Davy Crockett's American exceptionalism and white supremacy.

But again let's face it: left, right, or center, when your only benchmark is how you feel about things—about your personal intuitions and gut reactions—you get what we have in America today.

I was in graduate school getting a PhD in English literature at the height of the Deconstruction craze. I was there at the beginning of the postmodern idea that truth is a social construct. I read Jean-Francois Lyotard's 1979 book *La condition postmoderne* in French (which I could do in grad school but can't now).

Lyotard taught us that public discourse—the media and the politics and theology and sociology that it contains—necessarily discards concepts such as true and false and just and unjust in the rush merely to fill the empty air and the next election with *something. Anything.* (And remember that he was writing when cable TV was brand new; he had no idea how media outlets would explode.)

Because of this rush to fill the vacuum with . . . vacuity, Lyotard argues, our experience of our own experience becomes corrupted. We lose our connection to our own senses—our own concrete experiences—and begin to believe what we're told, even though the people telling us have no intention of telling us anything true. Not necessarily out of spite or manipulation, but merely because that's not what they do.

La condition postmoderne. We liberals at the time I suppose thought that conservatives would never read postmodern French philosophy anyway, so why worry? But Lyotard's world is where we live in the US today. You want your experience

to be of a left-wing flavor, turn on MSNBC. You want your experience to reflect your right-wing preconceptions, turn on Fox News. And there are plenty of sources farther left and farther right as well.

La condition postmoderne is an existence utterly locked in immediate emotion and impulse and totally divorced from reflection and reality. Everything is new. Everything is now. Everything is catastrophic. Everything is about . . . you.

THREE

What does this have to do with the mission of FUS? I'm getting there . . .

The Enlightenment Period in European thought is much maligned today for overemphasizing reason. That's a cartoon version of what happened.

Yes, many thinkers in the France of the 1700s prized reason, *raison*. But the most popular writer at that time was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a man who did not read books; a man who cultivated individualism and emotion; a man who abandoned each of his five children to orphanages because they cramped his style; a man who taught that the meaning of life is found in *sensibilité*. "Sensibility" as in *Sense and Sensibility*. Feeling.

It is Rousseau who invented the concept of the Social Contract that fed the making of the Declaration of Independence. It is Rousseau and his *sensibilité*, not Voltaire's *raison*, who is the father of the United States: anyone "more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one" and "be . . . sure you're right, then go ahead." That America.

Donald Trump and the Neo-Nazis are the epitome of *sensibilité*. They really feel it. It is *raison* that is lacking.

We can deploy those with a left-leaning *sensibilité* to battle those with a right-leaning *sensibilité* in the streets and at the ballot box. But what we liberals back in the sixties and seventies didn't understand is that if the only creed is "if it feels good, do it," sure, that will destroy the old up-tight 1950s social strictures; but eventually it will also corrode and destroy all social connections until feeling and greed and individualism rule.

Sensibilité corrodes everything.

You see, I must accuse myself of falling into a simple error back in the 1970s. I assumed it was fine to tear down the “gray flannel suit” way of life, believing that conservatives would always remain as they were then, Eisenhower Republicans, for the most part. It never occurred to me that we were unleashing a virulent form of conservatism.

In the US today, clearly, many if not most people believe that it is their right as US citizens to say and believe anything they want.

We need only reflect that this same thing has been a constant cliché about Unitarian Universalism since the 1970s—“you can believe anything you want.” (It’s never been true, but it’s a perception.) US culture today does not reflect the stern old Presbyterians or Lutherans or Methodists. It reflects Unitarian Universalists and our clichéd interpretive dance and insistence that all paths lead to truth, and everyone has a right to personal opinion.

Sensibilité.

(Notice that Humanists have never been accused of thinking you can think anything you want.)

Here’s the thing: that much-maligned reason used during the Enlightenment . . . that’s not where individualism comes from. It’s where individual *rights* come from.

Prejudice is a feeling. Constitutional rights are a product of reason. Disability rights are a product of reason. Universal human rights are about reason. You have to step back and think about those things.

Community exists outside of families and clan groups because of laws developed through reason, not feeling; and certainly not prejudice.

You do’t feel your way to believing that someone who disgusts you has human dignity and human rights. You can only *think* your way there.

First Unitarian Society needs to be in the conversation because a certain kind of liberalism won the day; a certain strain of Unitarian Universalism holds sway. An emotion-obsessed strain.

Garrison Keillor had a skit about Unitarian missionaries in the nineteenth century out here teaching the Indians interpretive dance. That’s not fair to any Unitarians or

Universalists, but that certainly wasn't FUS. We have the archives to prove it. We were saying that the white European god used to justify American exceptionalism did not exist; we were saying patriarchy is not a religious value; we were saying capitalism cannot build a just society . . .

CONCLUSION

Back to my question: If you're a liberal, what is it about President Trump that you find offensive? Is it the content or the affect—*how* he says it. Or both?

If it's only the content, then we Unitarian Universalists have gotten our wish and elected a postmodern president deeply in touch with his emotions and his authentic individual opinions. We merely have the wrong party. Maybe next time.

But if the lack of reason is what bothers you; the absence of a basic ability to think from A to B to C, I invite you to admit, as I do, that we liberals screwed up.

Yes, postmodern thinking opened up new ways of seeing things. It allowed us to see that most of what we call "truth" is a social construct. A social construct coupled with social power that forces conformity to dominant social norms.

Bad. All bad.

But the fact that it's so hard to think; so hard to reason; so hard to be in community . . . the difficulty does not absolve us from trying. The difficulty does not absolve us of trying to think beyond our preconceptions and prejudices.

Quite the opposite. *La condition postmoderne* requires us to be rational adults who are suspicious of our gut reactions and intuitions.

As Kurt Anderson rightly says in his essay, we live in a time and in a nation that has a "promiscuous devotion to the untrue."

FUS is here, carrying on the tradition of Unitarian Humanism, here to witness to the necessity and the power of reason, even in religious matters.

Why are we here?

What needle do we want to move?

Are we living our values?

Existential questions . . .

Let's get to work answering them with our actions . . .

SOURCE

<http://www.charismanews.com/us/53715-study-thousands-of-churches-closing-every-year-but-there-is-a-silver-lining>